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TRAFFIC (USA) REPORT ON THE WORLD TRADE IN CROCODILIAN PRODUCTS

before the

SUBCOMMITTEE ON FISHERIES AND WILDLIFE CONSERVATION
HOUSE SUBCOMMITTEE ON MERCHANT MARINE FISHERIES

July 16, 1979

presented by

Nicole Duplaix
Director of TRAFFIC(USA)

Testimony No. 2

WORLD WILDLIFE FUND-U.S.

TRAFFIC (U.S.A.)—Trade Records Analysis of Flora and Fauna in Commerce—is a scientific information-gathering program monitoring trade in wildlife, plants, and their products. It is funded by World Wildlife Fund-U.S.

Funded by
WORLD WILDLIFE FUND-U.S.

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TRAFFIC (USA) is a scientific, information gathering agency monitoring the trade in endangered and commercially exploited species of fauna and flora. We have reviewed the existing data on the U.S. trade of Crocodilian (including alligator) hides and skins prior to and after placing the American alligator on the Endangered Species list in 1973. Import figures for most foreign countries importing crocodilian products are also given.

During the early 1970s, the U.S. was one of the major importers, exporters and re-exporters of crocodilian products. An average of 125,000 live Caiman species, 32,000 sides (pieces), and 11,000 leather products were imported into the United States in 1970 and again in 1971. From 1970 to 1972, the U.S. supplied Japan with 16.3% of its crocodilian skins and 35.7% of its leather compared to 5.3% skins and 4.8% leather from 1974 to 1976, after the American alligator was placed on the Endangered Species list (Table 1). It is likely that most of these exports to Japan were American alligator skins due to the immediate drop in Japan imports from the U.S. following the listing of the American alligator as endangered in 1973.

The number of crocodilian products imported into the United States has decreased considerably since the early 1970s (Table 2).[1] In 1978, 14,053 skins, 13,164 pieces, 76 pounds, and 14,079 square feet of crocodilian articles were exported from the United States.[2] Of this total, only 325 farmed American alligator hides were exported, 323 to Japan and 2 hides to France. The rest were re-exported Caiman crocodylus skins and hides originally imported from Guyana, Suriname, Bolivia, and Paraguay. The major exports were made to Italy, Switzerland, West Germany, France, and Hong Kong.(Table 3).

Currently the major importers of crocodilian products are the United States, Japan, Italy, France, West Germany, Switzerland, the United Kingdom and Hong Kong (Table 3 and 4). ESSA proposes to exclude exports to non-CITES or CITES signatory countries which have taken reservations on any endangered crocodiles and alligators. Japan and Italy are not CITES members, and France, the leading luxury tanner (importing approximately 600,000 skins per year), has taken reservations on no less than 5 crocodilian species. Just recently, West Germany and Switzerland took out reservation for a single species, C. porosus. Should ESSA's proposal go through, only the UK and Hong Kong will be allowed

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1 The statistics we give today are based on the official CITES 1977 and 1978 annual reports. However, an American tanner has stated to us that while the CITES statistics give 13,000 crocodilian pieces exported from the U.S., he tans for export approximately 12,000 pieces and 5,000 hides per year. There were 23,867 live caimans from Panama which passed through the port of Miami in 1978, while the 1978 CITES report will show 2,278 live caimans imported with 12 shipments of unknown quantities. This discrepancy can also be found between other export - import documents, so we must view the CITES figures as minimal ones.

2 You may find these measurements confusing, but CITES countries report their import and export figures differently. In order to maintain accuracy, we do not standardize these by converting them to one measurement unit.

to import American alligator hides when they again become legally available.

The world market for crocodilian products is high, an estimated 2 million crocodile hides were traded in 1976. In comparison, the addition of under 10,000 legal American alligator hides in 1979, according to ESSA's estimate, would hardly affect existing trading patterns. This in itself is worrying. It is too easy to lose track of 10,000 skins on the world market particularly when non-CITES countries are involved. One legal skin can give rise to hundreds of products by reproduction of export permits as we have seen with a single elephant tusk extending itself into hundreds of pounds of ivory products once it reaches Hong Kong.

Since U.S. manufacturers and tanners have enforced the federal regulations regarding the alligator ban since 1973, they should be given special consideration. Perhaps we should envisage keeping a major portion or all alligator skins in the United States for domestic trade, exporting only finished products. However, regardless of where the skins are auctioned and tanned, and of the number of skins involved, we feel that the United States should not directly or indirectly encourage the importation of any Appendix I species. To put pressure on countries which are importing large numbers of endangered crocodilians, the United States, to maintain its firm commitment to wildlife conservation, should export American alligator hides only to CITES signatory countries which have not taken reservations on crocodiles.

The threat of poaching should not be dismissed. The value of crocodilian leather has increased 500% since 1970. The average

price of leather was $29.11/kg in 1970, while eight years later, leather imported by Japan was worth $156.06/kg. Similarly, raw skins were sold to Japan in 1970 for $14.22/kg versus $39.31/kg in 1978.[3]

In the United States, farmed American alligator hides sold for an average of $104.71 in 1976 and $62.38 in 1977. The average price of wild American alligator skins at an auction in Louisiana, October 1976, was $116.71 or $16.55 per foot and $89.24/skin or $12.23/foot at an auction in Louisiana, October 1977. In comparison, less desireable Caiman crocodilus skins imported into the U.S. cost two to three dollars per linear foot today.

Finished products are sold at staggering price to the consumer. In Paris, $1000 to $2000 for a Nile crocodile handbag is not uncommon. A pair of American alligator boots run approximately $700 in Texas.

In view of our findings, TRAFFIC (USA) feels that the reopening of the alligator hide trade in the United States would not be detrimental to the species provided the stringent identification and control procedures are enforced from the trapper to the consumer. We would like to commend and strongly support the actions ESSA has taken on this issue. They have carefully examined the facts and are working towards a sound solution to maintain protection for the American alligator following its change in status under CITES. ESSA's policy will reinforce and honor the Convention's intent by allowing export of American

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3 These prices are indications of market demand. Some endangered crocodilian species are far more valuable than others. Comparatively low prices were paid in the early 70s for desireable species now so endangered they are no longer available, whereas today even less desireable Caiman skins are sold for $40/kg.

alligator hides only to CITES signatory countries which have not taken reservations. Poaching could be averted by the proposed licensing procedures, and identification of American alligator hides made easier if hides are tanned and indelibly marked in the U.S. prior to export. The licensing and marking requirements imposed on foreign buyers, tanners, and manufacturers must insure against fraudulent practices involving counterfeit marks or falsification of documents if the CITES is going to be fully enforced. We sincerely hope so.

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TABLE 1

JAPAN IMPORTS OF ALLIGATOR AND CROCODILE LEATHER AND SKINS FROM THE UNITED STATES (KG)

YEAR	SKINS U.S.	TOTAL JAPAN IMP.	LEATHER U.S.	TOTAL JAPAN IMP.
1970	25,345	136,856	16,419	45,033
1971	14,692	112,512	9,556	32,722
1972	17,265	102,057	15,694	39,066
1973	NO FIGURES, AMERICAN ALLIGATOR PLACED ON END. SP. LIST.			
1974	1,259	22,644	659	13,153
1975	2,286	46,167	1,484	18,283
1976	1,589	27,206	58	14,407
1977	0	76,330	0	12,126
1978	0	102,854	0	12,161

Source: Japan Exports and Imports, compiled by the Ministry of Finance, published by the Japan Tariff Association.

TABLE 2

U.S. IMPORTS OF CROCODILIAN PRODUCTS

EXPORTING OR RE-EXPORTING COUNTRY	SPECIES	LIVE	SKINS	HIDES AND PIECES	LEATHER ARTICLES
(1977)					
FRANCE	C. c. crocodilus				118
	Croc. novaeguineae		38		
ITALY	C. c. crocodilus				350
PANAMA	C. c. crocodilus	245+			
PAPUA NEW GUINEA	Croc. novaeguineae		304		
	Croc. porosus		204		
SPAIN	C. c. fuscus				102
WEST GERMANY	C. c. fuscus				22
	Croc. novaeguineae				245
	Croc. porosus				21
TOTALS (1977)		245	546	0	858
(1978)					
COLOMBIA	C. c. species				5,250
EL SALVADOR	C. c. species	6,700			
FRENCH GUIANA	C. c. species		11,590		
ITALY	C. c. species				159
PANAMA	C. c. species	2,278+			
SPAIN	---				4
WEST GERMANY	---				748
TOTALS (1978)		8,978	11,590	0	6,161

Source: 1977 and 1978 (unpublished) U.S. CITES Annual Report

TABLE 3

U.S. EXPORTS OF CROCODILIAN PRODUCTS

U.S. EXPORTS TO:	SPECIES	COUNTRY OF ORIGIN	1977	1978
SWITZERLAND	C. c. crocodilus	Guyana and Suriname	6,643 pieces 47 pounds	
	C. c. species	Guyana and Suriname		7,372 hides
UNITED KINGDOM	Croc. novaeguineae	---	6 skins	
WEST GERMANY	C. c. species	Guyana and Suriname		947 hides
		Bolivia and Paraguay		686 pieces
HONG KONG	C. c. species	Guyana and Suriname		7,004 pieces
		Bolivia and Paraguay		1,269 pieces 42 pounds
FRANCE	C. c. species	Guyana and Suriname		385 hides
	A. mississippiensis	U.S.A.		2 hides
ITALY	C. c. species	Guyana and Suriname		1,125 hides 3,000 skins
		Bolivia and Paraguay		3,824 pieces 34 pounds
		---		4,579 sq. ft.
JAPAN	A, mississippiensis	U.S.A.		323 hides
UNSPECIFIED	C. c. species	---		900 skins 9,500 sq. ft.

Source: 1977 and 1978 (unpublished) U.S. CITES Annual Report.

TABLE 4

CROCODILIAN PRODUCTS IMPORTED INTO CITES SIGNATORY COUNTRIES
(Source: CITES Annual Reports)

COUNTRY	SPECIES	SKINS	HIDES	LEATHER PRODUCTS	EXPORTING OR RE-EXPORTING COUNTRY
SWITZERLAND (1978)	C. c. crocodilus	1,200	20,626 sides		FRANCE
		226	1,059 "		ITALY
		24	878 "		UK
			1,400 "		USA
	C. c. fuscus	455			WEST GERMANY
		96			ITALY
	C. c. yacare		7,516 "		FRANCE
	C. c. spp.		6 "		FRANCE
		300			USA
	Croc. acutus	250			ITALY
			1,771 "		FRANCE
	Croc. johnsoni	3,770			FRANCE
	Croc. novaeguineae	6,747			FRANCE
	Croc. porosus	2,036			FRANCE
		104			ITALY
UNITED KINGDOM (1978)	C. c. crocodilus	5,000 sq.ft.			PARAGUAY
	C. c. spp.	4,000 sq.ft.			PARAGUAY
		5,028			SWITZERLAND
	Croc. novaeguineae	100			USA
	Croc. porosus	63			FRANCE
		50			PAPUA NEW GUINEA
	Caiman s. sclerops	65			GUYANA
WEST GERMANY (1977)	C. c. crocodilus		56,974	257	FRANCE
			1,068		NETHERLANDS
			34,740	1,962	ITALY
			2,066		PARAGUAY
			57		SINGAPORE
	C. c. fuscus		133,058		COLOMBIA
			15,489	348	ITALY
	C. c. yacare		9,981	6	FRANCE
	Croc. acutus		351		FRANCE
	Croc. novaeguineae		2,750		FRANCE
	Croc. porosus		3,545	7	FRANCE
			2,605	676	ITALY
			367		SINGAPORE
	Alligatoridae spp.		1,598		BOLIVIA
	Crocodilidae spp.			9	ITALY

APPENDIX I

Excerpt from: The Wildlife Trade, Chapter 15 (pp. 253 - 271) in WILDLIFE IN AMERICA, H. P. Brokaw, editor, 1978.

International trade in crocodilian hides exemplifies many of the problems resulting from wildlife commerce and attempts to regulate it. In the 1950's and early 1960's, 5 to 10 million crocodilian hides were traded internationally each year. The state of Amazonas, Brazil, alone marketed 4.9 million caiman hides in 1950 (Carvalho, 1967). A single New York City area tanner processed more than 750,000 hides a year. Under such intense hunting pressure, crocodilians everywhere became endangered, and one producer country after another enacted protective legislation. In Africa most of this protection came into being between 1964 and 1970 (Cott and Pooley, 1972). The American Alligator was afforded federal protection under the Lacey Act and Endangered Species Conservation Act of 1969.

Because U.S. Government wildlife and customs agents have difficulty in distinguishing among the various species of crocodilian hides, dealers declare their imports to be from nonprotected species. Before the Nile Crocodile (*Crocodylus niloticus*) was placed on the U.S. Endangered Species List, it was the most frequently imported African crocodile hide. After it appeared on the list, most imported African hides were declared to be from another African species, the Slender-snouted Crocodile (*Crocodylus cataphractus*), but in most instances the species had not actually changed. Similarly, Yacare Caiman (*Caiman crocodilus yacare*) hides from Bolivia and Paraguay were declared to be Spectacled Caiman (*Caiman crocodilus crocodilus*), and Morelet's Crocodile (*Crocodylus moreleti*) suddenly became American Crocodile (*Crocodylus acutus*).

But even before the various legislative prohibitions had a chance to take effect, many of the crocodilian hide dealers, tanners, and manufacturers went out of business as hides became increasingly rare. In the 1950's there were over 20 tanners and manufacturers dealing in crocodilian hides in the metropolitan New York City area. By the late 1960's approximately half that number remained.

As the hides became difficult to obtain, the reptile leather industry turned to less desirable species to fill its needs. In South America, the species of first choice were the American (*Crocodylus acutus*) and Orinoco (*C. intermedius*) Crocodiles, which had no bony buttons (osteoderms) in the belly skins. Even as these two species were becoming scarce, the hunters sought out the large and not too bony Black (*Melanosuchus niger*) and Broad-snouted (*Caiman latirostris*) Caimans. When they in turn became scarce, the hunters turned to the smaller, bonier Spectacled (*Caiman crocodilus crocodilus*) and Yacare (*C.c. yacare*) Caimans. These less desirable species permitted hunters (and international consumers) to continue operations when the preferred species were too scarce to support an industry. The secondary species also subsidized continued hunting of the preferred species, for any hunter making a living from Spectacled Caiman kills every Black Caiman or crocodile he stumbles across. With international prices of $50 to $75 for a 6-foot American Crocodile hide, hunters are not likely to pass up this source of income. This use of less desirable alternate species to subsidize a declining industry is seen in other wildlife species traded internationally; whales and the whaling industry are prime examples.

The decline in New York metropolitan reptile hide tanners cannot be attributed to the protective legislation, CITES, the U.S. Endangered Species Acts, and the various state laws despite industry claims to the contrary. The same decline is occurring in Europe and is the result of simple economics. Fancy reptile leather products cannot be manufactured by machine. They require a great deal of handwork by individual craftsmen, and wages are so high that the resulting products are too expensive for the market. How many high quality saltwater crocodile purses can an industry sell at $400 apiece? Many reptile leather products are now made in places where inexpensive labor is available (Hong Kong, for instance), while the skilled craftsmen of Europe and North America are turning to other jobs.

Today an estimated 2 million crocodilian hides are traded annually in international commerce, compared with the 5 to 10 million of earlier years. Because of improper preservation in the field, which results in rot and severe scale slip, 50 percent of these hides are unusable and are lost. French tanners consume approximately 500,000 a year; Italians, 400,000; and West Germans, 350,000 (250,000 hides and 100,000 in the form of products). The remainder are consumed in the United States, Japan, England, and Singapore.

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pp. 261,262.